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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 000224

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TAGS: PREL PGOV RS GG

SUBJECT: ANALYSTS QUESTION PAVEL FELGENHAUER'S CREDIBILITY

REF: A. 08 TBILISI 2222 (NOTAL)

¶B. TEFFT-FRIED E-MAIL DEC 17 2008

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle: Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: While Russian analyst Pavel Felgenhauer's prediction of an August war with Georgia has been seized upon by Georgian decisionmakers as proof of Russian responsibility for the war (reftels), he is held in low regard by other respected Russian military analysts. Felgenhauer enjoys being quotable, which -- combined with his fluent English and investment in the diplomatic circuit -- has helped cultivate his high profile. In polling other leading military analysts, we were told that Felgenhauer lacks access to military circles, a charge he does not deny. Noting that Felgenhauer has made a number of less successful predictions, these analysts suggest that he lucked out in his prognosis, with all -- including Felgenhauer -- maintaining that it took Georgian actions on August 7-8 to trigger the inevitable Russian military response. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Embassy Tbilisi has reported that Russian military analyst Pavel Felgenhauer enjoys considerable confidence in high government circles in Georgia, including with President Saakashvili, thanks to his May 2008 prediction that Russia would "launch a war" against Georgia in August of that year (reftels). Felgenhauer's December 2008 article in Novaya Gazeta, suggesting plans for a new war against Georgia, in order to put an end to the ongoing violence in the security zones in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, has likewise garnered attention and Georgian concern. When we met with Felgenhauer, he maintained that Russia sought to "finish the job" of ousting Georgian president Saakashvili, with the goal of preventing Georgia's NATO accession and further eroding Georgian territorial integrity. He forecast mid-April as the earliest starting date for a conflict, but when pressed allowed the war might only begin months later, or even in ¶2010. While Felgenhauer's accessibility and command of the English language make him popular on the Moscow diplomatic circuit, Felgenhauer receives faint and sometimes damning praise from rival military analysts.

Felgenhauer's analyses

¶3. (C) Many military experts and commentators we surveyed took issue with Felgenhauer's military commentary, including his latest prediction of a war with Georgia in April 2009. While Aleksandr Golts, Deputy Editor of Yezhnedelniy Journal, insisted he "didn't comment on colleagues," he did note Felgenhauer had "predicted a lot of things," including that Georgia would win the August 2008 war. He dismissed Felgenhauer's assessment that there would be a new war with Georgia in April, provided Saakashvili did not seek to take Abkhazia and South Ossetia back by force. Yevgeniy Volk from the Heritage Foundation told us Felgenhauer was "not a military expert, although he tries to be." Noting that Felgenhauer's educational background was in biology and not

military affairs, Volk suggested that for a non-military expert, Felgenhauer "said a lot of the right things;" however, for military experts, what he said "did not make sense when put together." Carnegie Center Director Dmitriy Trenin barked "humbug" when asked whether Felgenhauer was an astute analyst. Calling him "vain" and "grandiose," Trenin said Felgenhauer conflated Russian preparations for war with an intent to go to war. A trigger was required, he stressed, and Saakashvili delivered it on August 7-8.

¶4. (C) Felgenhauer's predictions of another imminent war have left many experienced Russian observers unimpressed. Pavel Zolotarov, retired General and Deputy Director of U.S.A.-Canada Institute, stated it was in neither Russia's nor Georgia's interest to start a new war in April, due to the necessity to deal with the economic crisis. While allowing that a lack of trust was contributing to tensions and causing each side to accuse the other of preparing for war, Ivan Safranchuk of the World Security Institute agreed with Zolotarov that neither side actually wanted a new war. Conceding Russia might want to "finish the job" by overthrowing Saakashvili, Safranchuk asserted Russia would make no such move, as the international community would be outraged if Russia invaded Georgia again.

Deliberately provocative

¶5. (C) Aleksandr Belkin of the Council of Foreign and Defense Policy agreed with Golts that Felgenhauer sometimes engaged "in a style similar to yellow journalism," in order

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to attract attention to himself and his articles. Belkin criticized Felgenhauer's prediction of an April 2009 war as another example of going too far for publicity's sake. Another example of Felgenhauer's flair for the dramatic was his comment in a September 27, 2008 interview with The Guardian that the Russian leadership believed a war with NATO was possible, and that the Russian military was preparing for an "all-out nuclear war with America." While we assume Russia, like the U.S., has nuclear contingency plans, Felgenhauer delights in drawing the worst interpretation. Embassy officers continue to meet with Felgenhauer, but over the last several years have relied on him less for his interpretation of military developments.

Felgenhauer's access

¶6. (C) Analysts such as Golts also note that while Felgenhauer is received at high levels in Tbilisi, he has no access to Russian military or political circles. In contrast to other analysts, who have served as military officers in the Ministry of Defense or other military agencies, and often travel with the Minister of Defense or the Chief of General Staff, Felgenhauer is rarely invited to MOD background briefings. Felgenhauer readily admits that most of his material is derived from the press, think tanks, and non-Russian government officials. While Felgenhauer gets high marks from some for his ability to piece together rumors and reports into convincing commentaries on intra-MOD developments, others, such as commentator and author Vladimir Solovyev, are less flattering: "there are 1000 journalists in Russia and occasionally, no matter how stupid, they can sound right." Solovyev maintained that Felgenhauer was frozen out of the Ministry of Defense, where he was viewed as a gadfly. When asked whether he read Felgenhauer's reports to assess political-military debates or trends in Russia, Solovyev said, "No, I call my contacts in the military." Trenin told us that Felgenhauer enjoyed access 15 years ago, in the initial hurly-burly of the Yeltsin years, but no longer.

Comment

¶7. (C) Felgenhauer struck analytical gold with his prediction of an August war, but his prescience appears to be in divining at what point Saakashvili would take the liberal bait laid down by Russia. Felgenhauer, like all analysts with whom we spoke, agreed that once Tbilisi launched an attack on Tskhinvali and on Russian peacekeepers, a massive Russian retaliation was guaranteed. We place little credence in his new prediction of a conflict "anytime after mid-April 2009," which is too vague to be useful, but broad enough to have a chance of coming true. If Georgia provides Russia with a pretext, by responding militarily to provocation along the territorial lines, we are confident that Russia will respond, whether in April or any time thereafter. This raises the stakes as we negotiate for a continued international presence on both sides of the administrative lines.

BEYRLE